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ABSTRACT

Beginning principals are often overwhelmed by their job. Traditionally, they have been left to fend for themselves. For this reason, schools and districts have been implementing formal induction programs to help the principals during their first year on the job. This digest examines the challenges faced by new administrators and the steps that districts can take to provide a smooth entry into the principalship. It also describes characteristics of good induction programs. New administrators experience many stresses as they adjust to their new position. Among the most stressful are supervising personnel and adjusting to the social climate and culture of the organization. Good induction programs help by providing mentors who in turn provide instructional, administrative, and emotional support. Other suggestions for effective induction programs include the following: help the newcomer stay focused on the big picture; provide a variety of strategies beyond one-on-one mentoring; and help the newcomer adjust to the culture of the district through visits and conferences. The digest concludes by providing some general and specific external resources for supporting district induction programs. (WFA)

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**Larry Lashway**

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ERIC DIGEST

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# Inducting School Leaders

*By Larry Lashway*

If experienced principals find their jobs to be exhausting and stressful—and most surveys indicate they do—then what is it like for newcomers? Not surprisingly, words such as "lost," "overwhelmed," and "shell-shocked" pervade the literature on first-year principals.

Traditionally, rookie principals have been left to sink or swim. Having completed a university training program, they are presumed to be prepared, and get little direction beyond bland encouragement or an occasional practical tip. But that attitude is changing as schools realize that a scarcity of high-quality principals means promising leaders should not only be energetically recruited but carefully nurtured once they're on board.

Formal induction programs are too new to have generated a significant body of empirical research, but there is a growing literature that articulates a rationale for such programs, describes the efforts of districts to nurture new leaders, and provides early testimony that induction efforts are well-received. This *Digest* examines the challenges faced by new administrators and the steps that districts can take to provide a smooth entry into the principalship.

### What Problems Do First-Year Administrators Face?

By all accounts, new administrators experience intense, unrelenting stress as they try to adjust their textbook understanding of leadership to the real world of practice. They have to master technical skills, learn to deal with a variety of constituents, and wrestle with doubts about personal adequacy, all in a fast-paced environment that leaves little time for reflection and thoughtfulness (Parkay and Rhodes 1992). They are frequently haunted by the fear that a moment of inattention will blossom into a crisis. In the words of one beginning assistant principal, "You can't turn your back on something, 'cause that might be *the* thing" (Hartzell and colleagues 1995).

First-year stress comes not just from task overload, but from the need for quick assimilation into a new culture. Every school is a unique organization, with its own history, environment, and cast of characters. New principals not only have to learn "how things are done," but "how things are done *here*" (Crow and Mathews 1998). They must go from "stranger" to "insider," quickly discerning the unwritten rules and identifying the real movers and shakers (Aiken 2002).

Many new administrators also find it disconcerting to deal with teachers as supervisors rather than peers. Operating for the first time from a schoolwide perspective, some are shocked to see the parochialism of some teachers' behavior (Hartzell and colleagues).

Finally, many beginners report a strong sense of isolation. Unlike new teachers, who can usually find an empathetic colleague just down the hall, principals literally have no peers in their building. The isolation can be magnified when they receive little feedback from supervisors.

### Why Does Induction Matter?

Given the stress faced by first-year leaders, simple compassion would be reason enough to ease their transition into the field. However, well-designed induction programs can also enhance the well-being of the district.

Sociologists have pointed out that the first year is a crucial period in administrators' *socialization*, the process by which they internalize the skills, values, and dispositions of the profession (Aiken; Crow and Mathews; Normore 2003). While newcomers will enter the job with both informal and formal preparation, they still face the crucial task of "organizational socialization," in which the simple abstractions learned in university classrooms must be adapted to the messy realities of real schools.

During this period, beginning principals are strongly motivated to fit in to their new environment, and the norms of the organization are likely to outweigh the norms acquired during training. This offers districts a unique opportunity to influence the goals and behaviors of new leaders (Normore).

In adapting to the school, newcomers often experience role conflict between the immediate demands of the job and the district's reform agenda. For example, early career principals interviewed by Aiken described a tension between the "custodial" and "innovative" dimensions of the job; they felt they had to effectively run the school as it was before taking it in a new direction. A well-designed induction program can help novices articulate such dilemmas and find a way of achieving balance.

Although direct empirical evidence is scarce, some researchers have speculated that formal induction programs improve retention. Linda Morford (2002), after interviewing ten new rural principals who had no access to any kind of induction program, found two years later that nine of them had either moved on to other positions or returned to teaching.

### How Does Mentoring Assist Induction?

Induction has become almost synonymous with mentoring, and understandably so. Few newcomers will fail to benefit from having an empathetic, experienced colleague who can provide coaching in technical skills, guide them through the political minefields, and provide a perspective that encourages reflection. However, there are also pitfalls. Mentors may become too controlling or overprotective, may try to shape their protégé into a clone of themselves, or may present only a narrow perspective on the newcomer's situation (Crow and Mathews).

Nonetheless, mentoring programs are generally welcomed by beginners (Howley and colleagues 2002; Ricciardi 2000). Laura Dukess (2001), after interviews with mentors, protégés, and supervisors of mentoring programs in six New York City community districts, concluded that good mentors rendered three forms of assistance to new principals:

1. They provided instructional support by keeping newcomers' attention focused on learning issues and offering models of successful practice.
2. They provided administrative and managerial support not just by giving practical tips but by helping their protégés set priorities.
3. They provided emotional support by listening carefully and being present at particularly stressful moments.



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Dukess also concluded that good results did not automatically come just by putting a mentor and protégé together. Key steps included careful matching of mentors and protégés, clear expectations and guidelines for participants, adequate time for the mentor, and selection of mentors who have a record of success and who are "reflective, compassionate, good listeners, good communicators, and able to speak the hard truth."

### What Are the Characteristics of Good Induction Programs?

Increasingly, districts are taking a "grow your own" approach to provide newcomers with a smooth entry tailored to the context of the district. Although almost any assistance would be beneficial to new principals, early experience with induction programs suggests some basic principles that can guide district efforts.

First, although new administrators often worry the most about technical skills, induction programs should help candidates stay focused on the big picture. Aiken recommends that induction should "support principals through paradox, help to demystify leadership practice, and provide opportunities for collaborative and reflective learning."

At the same time, programs must respect the immediate needs of the new administrators. Howley and colleagues found that new principals in a leadership academy expressed a strong preference for focusing on what one called "practical, hands-on, get-me-through-the-first-year-so-I-can-survive stuff." They were much less interested in reflective portfolio activities centered around the ISLLC standards. Striking the right balance is a key challenge.

Second, induction involves more than one-to-one mentoring. Districts can use a wide array of strategies, including portfolios, professional development plans, study groups, leadership academies, focus groups, peer coaching, workshops, and retreats (Peterson 2001).

Third, induction is especially powerful when it is embedded in the culture of the district, not just a one-shot "extra" activity for newcomers. For example, New York City's District Two incorporates day-long principal conferences on instructional topics, study groups, support groups, visits to other schools, and intensive "walkthroughs" by central-office supervisors (Elmore and Burney 2000). In their discussions with new principals, the researchers were struck by the degree to which new principals had internalized the district's culture of continuous learning and improvement.

### What External Resources Can Support District Induction Programs?

Many districts, especially those in rural areas, have difficulty finding the personnel or money to develop comprehensive induction programs. Fortunately, districts can leverage their efforts through partnerships with states or professional associations.

More states are offering school leadership academies that sometimes include programs designed for new leaders. For example, Ohio has developed an entry-year leadership academy built around mentoring and portfolio development. As part of the initiative, the state has produced a curriculum for training mentors and contracted with Educational Testing Service to design reflective questions for the portfolio (Beebe and colleagues 2002).

Some states have realigned their certification requirements to better support the developmental needs of leaders (Southern Regional Education Board 2002). For example, Kentucky and Louisiana use two-tiered licensure systems in which full certification comes only after successful experience as an administrator. School leaders are provided mentoring and other forms of assistance, leading to full-fledged certification after a successful first year. These programs provide a natural structure into which districts can integrate their local priorities.

Universities offer another source of support. For example, the New Teacher Center at the University of California, Santa Cruz, provides trained coaches to give individualized guidance to new administrators. Participants meet every two weeks and also maintain contact by email and phone. Services include observation and coaching in authentic work dilemmas (Bloom 1999).

Professional associations offer a variety of professional development resources. The National Association of Elementary School Principals conducts numerous workshops, assessments, and training opportunities. NAESP also partners with Nova Southeastern University to offer intensive mentor training and certification. The National Association of Secondary School Principals has long been a leader in using assessment center methods to promote principal development.

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